Reading Religion in Rivers: A study of Kar Sewa of Holy Kali Bein

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Abstract: In the face of ever-increasing threat of environmental pollution , measures being taken have proved desperately deficient. What has been found utterly lacking is the sincerity and moral integrity on the part of governments, political leaders and industrialists. Environmentalists have realized that the environmental crisis is basically moral and spiritual in nature. In order to deal with the problem effectively what is required is change of mind and life-style. U.N.O. and other global organizations are coming to realize that religion can be an effective tool for creating an eco-friendly atmosphere. If religions come out of temples and join the struggle against environmental crisis, it is very easy to conserve earth's environment for ourselves and the generations to come. Kar sewa of the Holy Bein river in Punjab, a community project being monitored by common people under the guidance of Sant Balbir Singh Seechewal, has emerged as a successful attempt at conservation of rivers through spiritual transformation. In this project religion and ecology go hand in hand complementing each other. This paper studies religious nature of this environmental project with a view to draw some conclusions that can be usefully applied for making other rivers and streams pollution-free. Special attention is paid to the analysis of experiences and lessons of the kar sewa of the river Kali Bein and strategies being used in this project.

Keywords: Religion and environment, Sikhism, river, management and conservation of rivers, Kar sewa, Holy Kali Bein.

1. Introduction:

Otherwise a very complex word (Schellenberg, 2005; Nye, 2008), "religion", in the present study, is taken simply to mean a "belief in, recognition of, or an awakened sense of, a higher unseen controlling power or powers, with the emotion and morality connected therewith." (Schwarz et al., 1989). Religion concerns an individual as well as groups of individuals. Combining substantive (beliefs) and functionalist (practices) aspects of religion (Hamm, 1987) into a single moral community, Durkheim has defined religion as a "unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things." (Durkheim et al., 2009). There has been a large variety of institutionalized religions around the world since ancient times. Sikhism, one of the latest religions of world (Tiwari, 1992), essentially believes in One God (Cole, 2004). The *Mool Mantra* of the Gurbani describes the Supreme Being thus:

> There is but one God. True is His Name, creative His personality and immortal His form. He is without fear, sans enmity, unborn and self-illumined. By the Guru's grace (He is obtained.) (*SGGS*, p.1)

With its message of unity and equality of all human beings, the Sikh concept of One God brought a revolutionary change in the Indian religio-philosophical tradition (Singh, 2009). The environmental thought of Sikhism is based on the idea of unity and harmony between man, nature (God's creation) and God, as suggested in the *Mool Mantra*. The chief organizer of the kar sewa of Kali Bein river, Sant Balbir Singh Seechewal who professes Sikh faith (Kotha Guru, 2009), began his Kali Bein project a decade ago at the very place in Sultanpur Lodhi where the *Mool Mantra* was first uttered by Guru Nanak Dev Ji after his enlightenment on the banks of the river in 1507 AD (Sodhi, 1961). Kali Bein at Sultanpur Lodhi, thus, becomes the first pilgrimage for the followers of Guru Nanak Dev and believers in his humanitarian philosophy.

A 160 km-long tributary of the river Beas, Kali Bein (meaning back water stream) originates from water springs interspersed in the Terkiana marshland in Mukerian tehsil of district Hoshiarpur. Taking a zigzag course it traverses snakelike (*Souvenir*, 2006) from north-east to south-west in Hoshiarpur and Kapurthala districts of Punjab between latitudes of 31.892393N and 31.166214N and longitudes of 75.570649E and 75.04853E (Google Maps, 2010). The catchment area of Kali Bein is 945 sq. miles (1520.830 sq. km). Its average slope is 13.5 ft/mile (Waterinfo, 2006). The international Ramsar site Kanjli wetland is situated on it near Kapurthala. Another Ramsar site, Hari-ke wetland is situated near a place where Kali Bein merges with the river Beas again (Ladhar, 2004). In Hoshiarpur district, about 36 villages and in Kapurthala district, about 39 villages and 5 towns are situated on its banks (*Souvenir*, 2006). Before the advent of Green Revolution, Kali Bein had been life-line of the people in Doaba area being a major source of water for irrigation, a means to drain out excess water from the water-logged areas of Hoshiarpur and to supply this water to water-starved areas of Kapurthala, a major source of water-table recharging, and a protection from floods. Thus the river has a unique geographic and economic significance.

Apart from being historically associated with the life and philosophy of Guru Nanak Dev, Kali Bein is closely linked to the religious and cultural life of the Doaba region. Many historical gurdwaras are situated on its banks; for example, Gurdwara Pul Pukhta (related to the Sixth Guru Shri Hargobind), Gurdwara Sant Ghat (the site of Guru Nanak Dev's enlightenment), Gurdwara Ber Sahib (the place where Guru Nanak Dev used to take daily bath and where he planted a Plum tree which is still there), Gurdwara Rababsar at Bharoana (from where the Guru Ji's companion Mardana got his historical *rabab* for the accompaniment of Guru Nanak Dev's divine recitals). Since times immemorial, people living near its banks had been taking dips into its waters on occasions of Vaisakhi, Puranmashi, Amavasya, etc.

"Kar Sewa" is basically a religious term meaning "voluntary contribution of physical labour towards cleaning and construction operations at sacred tanks and temples" (Singh, 1996). "Kar sewa of Kali Bein," in this paper, means a community project for the rejuvenation of Kali Bein river being monitored by Sant Balbir Singh Seechewal, an eminent environmentalist, hailed as "the Hero of Environment" by world famous *Time* Magazine. In this context kar sewa acquires a far extended geographical dimension and a wider historical and religious significance than cleaning of a mere tank confined within the precincts of a holy place. In involving large sections

of masses to confront environmental challenges and risks affecting a vast area, Kar sewa of the Kali Bein becomes a unique community project in which environmentalism and religion go together. The object of this paper is to study the ways in which religion and environmentalism complement each other in kar sewa of the Kali Bein and bring about miraculous results in the conservation of the river. It will also be explored how this experiment in green religiosity can be benefited from in effective management of other rivers and streams in Punjab and India.

2. Study Area:

This paper will focus on three major issues: (1) utter pollution of Holy Kali Bein caused by trade effluents and domestic sewage of factories, villages and towns situated along its banks and its transformation into a pollution-free picnic spot as a result of Kar sewa; (2) environmental strategies of Sant Seechewal and his devotees; and (3) Emergence of Kar sewa of Kali Bein as a role model for effective use of religious theory and practice for environmental upgradation and conservation of natural water resources.

3. Materials and methods:

So far as Kali Bein as a natural water resource is concerned, not much published research material is available. Very commonplace information about its geographical situation is found in Gazetteers of Hoshiarpur and Kapurthala districts and other government records. This study researches the available material, complementing it with information gathered during practical Kar sewa work. A lot, however, needs still to be done in this regard. Janamsakhi literature also contains only brief references to the river. Some prominent Punjabi poets, such as Singh, (1971), Azad (1970), Tulsi (1970), etc. have composed epics about life history of Guru Nanak Dev and pointed out the religious significance of the river. As regards the role of Sant Balbir Singh Seechewal as a religious leader and an environmentalist, this study explores the printed and other versions of his sermons and interviews. As this paper deals with the history that is currently in the making, reports about the kar sewa work that have been appearing in the media from time to time have also been found especially useful.

4. Results and Discussion:

a) Crisis of Kali Bein:

Forgetting all its economic, historical and religious significance, most of the factories, villages and towns on its banks started throwing their effluents, domestic sewage and even solid waste into the Bein turning it into a garbage dumping site. Even the religious people joined this general offensive on the Holy river. The Kali Bein was, thus, on the verge of death when environmentalists, intellectuals, writers and religious and social leaders started holding seminars and conferences to express their concern over the plight of Kali Bein. But their efforts were too small, isolated and unsystematic to prove a befitting rejoinder to the threat (*Souvenir*, 2006).

b) Sant Seechewal -led Kar sewa of Kali Bein:

Before turning to the cleaning and renovation of Holy Kai Bein in July 2000 and coming to be known as “eco-Baba” (*The Tribune*, 18/08/2006), Sant Balbir Singh Seechewal (birth 1962-) had already won considerable mass following in Shahkot Block of Jalandhar district by the turn of millennium in recognition to his dedicated and consistent work in road building,

education, and general public welfare and had come to be called "Saint of the Roads" (*The Hindu*, May 6, 2004) and "Welfare Baba" (*de l'Inde*, Nov.- Dec., 2004).

c) Achievements of Kar sewa:

- **Rejuvenation of Kali Bein** (Revival of the river) (*India Today*, August 31-Sep. 2004): The whole stretch of 160 km-Long River was cleared of silt and hyacinth that choked the flow of water. With the removed silt the banks of the Bein were raised and roads and bathing ghats were built along its banks at seven places, namely, Sultanpur Lodhi, Gallowal, Bhulath, Subhanpur, Kanjli, Himmatpur and Fatehwal. Flower and fruit trees were planted along roads on the banks. Boats were installed to promote water tourism. In order to restore flow of water in Kali Bein, its sources were located, cleaned and preserved. With the help of government, a permanent regulator has been installed at Mukerian Hydel Channel in order to release 350 cusecs of water into the Bein. Mini Power Projects at different places on the Kali Bein are being planned. (*Ajit*, 12/07/2010) Campaigns were organized for promoting public awareness against its pollution.(*Nirmal Noor,* Dec., 2007)
- **Boosting up of Doaba economy**: Kar sewa of the Holy Bein has shown way to eco-friendly economic development of the Doaba. With the restoration of flow of water in the Bein, excess water of water-logged areas of Hoshiarpur have got an outlet and agriculture has been made possible in large tracts of land in Dasuya and Mukerian. It has enhanced the income of farmers making the whole area prosperous (*The Times of India*, 23/07/2006). With restoration of water-table recharging, level of subsoil water has started rising in water-deficient district of Kapurthala. The hand-pumps that had dried up have started giving water (sikhiwiki.org, 2010).
- **Building of Roads along the river**: Preparation of the road along the river from Dhanoa to Kanjli has facilitated transportation in the area. Now the farmers can reach their lands easily. It is now easier for them to take their agricultural produce to the markets. One of the results of all this is that the prices of these neglected lands have gone up by many times bringing huge benefits to the farmers (*Souvenir*, 2006).
- **Recycling the waste waters:** Efforts to stop the inflow of dirty waters and keep the Bein clean have started the process of development in the whole area along the Kali Bein. For ex. sewerage systems are being installed in villages situated near the river. Plans are being made to dispose of their dirty waters. An important achievement of the Kali Bein project is recycling of the waste waters. In about 100 villages and towns along the Bein and away from the river (Seechewal in District Jalandhar, Lohara in district Moga and so on) wastewater is being treated in natural aerobic manner and supplied for irrigation of crops. This model, which has come to be known as the Seechewal Model, has proved very beneficial and helpful in controlling water pollution, boosting agricultural produce, and saving money on fertilizers, power and water (Virk, 2010).
- **Technological Achievements**: In his All India Radio Address to the nation on the eve of Technology Day, the then President of India, Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam (11/05/2004) stressed the importance of Kali Bein project as a great technological achievement of the nation. That

is perhaps why, in spite of all his religious inclinations, Sant Seechewal was awarded Fellowship by Punjab Academy of Sciences and prestigious "Madhu Bhasin Memorial Award 2008" by Guru Jambheshwar University of Science and Technology Hissar (*Nirmal Noor,* March-June 2009). What is remarkable about this aspect of Kar sewa is that in it, science, technology and religion have become complementary to each other with a view to rescue man and his environment. Attempting to be eco-friendly, science turns religious and religion scientific. Sant Avtar Singh Technical Research Centre at Nirmal Kuteya Sultanpur Lodhi devises and manufactures low-cost, but efficient mechanical devices for the renovation of the river. The sewerage systems being installed during the cleaning campaign are devised indigenously. Unique architectural stone-lining of the banks of the river which fascinates the onlookers, is the creation of common kar sewaks. No technique has been imported from the west; it is all of local make (*Nirmal Noor*, Dec. 2007).

- **Cultural Aspect**: Kali Bein experiment is in fact an attempt to save the heritage not only of our natural water resources but also of common brotherhood of Punjab. In this community project, the Sikhs, Hindus, Muslims, Christians and others join together for saving environment which is a matter of common concern. The Kali Bein community project, thus, seeks to widen and redefine the scope of religion so that it embraces the whole society and also becomes relevant to times. In this, the Kar sewa becomes a lighthouse for all the religions today (Chahal, 2009). Kalam (24/09/2006) remarks:

  > "While I was thinking how we should solve the problem of improving the environment of rivers and religious places, I find one of our enlightened citizens has taken the initiative and leadership and demonstrated the power of ignited individuals to solve societal problem. Let this model spread in all the places of divine worship and inspire the pilgrims to participate in the task of clean environment in water and air."

- **Positive perseverance**: Kar sewa of Kali Bein has proved a positive project to provide workable solutions to the present-day problems related to the pollution of environment and natural water resources. Its stress is not on protesting but on presenting the positive alternative arrangements (*Hindustan Times*, 02/07/2004), although, for saffron-clad Sant Seechewal, the path to green sainthood (*The Tribune*, 19/10/2008) had not been without risks and dangers. Taking an adverse stance, SGPC called upon the Sikh Sangat not to cooperate with Sant Seechewal's Kar sewa (*Jagbani,* 26/12/2000). Many were injured when SGPC men came to clash with the Kar sewaks at the Holy Bein (*Jagbani*, 24/12/2000). If the opposition died out with the passage of time, it is due to positive perseverance of Kar sewaks. Jathedar Avtar Singh, the president of SGPC, came to attend 10th Anniversary celebrations of Kar sewa of the Holy Bein at Nirmal Kuteya Sultanpur Lodhi and declared Rs. 10 lakhs' aid for Kar sewa work (*Ajit* 26/07/2010).

5. Religious Strategies for conservation of natural water resources:

- **The Gurbani for environmental inspiration**: In his speech at Climate Change Conference at Copenhagen held in December 2009, Sant Seechewal stressed that Sikhism is a green religion (Seechewal, Dec., 2009). The Gurus have advised us to revere natural elements like

water, air and earth and take care of them (*SGGS*, p. 8). In all his sermons to his followers, he highlights "*daya*", or compassion to all as a chief religious value (*SGGS*, p.3). According to the Gurbani, the Almighty resides in His Nature (*SGGS*, P. 469); we must take care of it if we want to worship Him. Sant Seechewal stresses that the ideal man of the Gurbani is neither a weakling nor a selfish man; he is rather a responsible being. We must not expect of others to solve our problems for us. We should come forward and do our duties ourselves (*SGGS*, p.474). To the people who come to seek his blessings, he proposes "sewa" (selfless service) and "simran" (meditation) as solution to all their problems (*Ajit*, 29/04/2010). "Sewa," for him, is not limited to a particular community or religion; it rather includes service to whole humanity, environment, and Omnipresent God. Other sacred texts can also be used for inspiring and motivating the people for natural water conservation.

- **Nagar Kirtans for environmental upgradation**: For spreading environmental awareness, Sant Seechewal organizes gatherings of the Sangat on all occasions of religious importance (*Dainik Bhaskar*, 15/03/2010 and 10/04/2010). Nagar Kirtans (religious processions) are also held along the river Kali Bein every year on Guru Nanak Dev Ji's birthday (*The Times of India*, 4/11/2006). At all such functions, environmental conservation is preached and saplings of various types of shady, fruit and medicinal plants are distributed among the people as the grace (*Prasad*) of God. The tradition of celebrating Vaisakhi festival on the banks of the river Kali Bein has been revived for restoration of man's sense of solidarity with nature (*Ajit*, 15/04/2010). Cleaning and renovation of river before Nagar Kirtans and Vaisakhi celebrations constitute an important part of celebration themselves (*Ajit*, 12/04/2010; *Dainik Bhaskar*, 15/04/2010).
- **Highlighting religious significance of other rivers:** An important strategy for building up a mass movement for conservation of a river is to refresh its historical, cultural and religious ties with the surrounding society. For example, if such mass movement for conservation of river Satluj is to be initiated it is necessary to highlight that the polluted waters of this river are being directly drunken by the people and used in the *sarovars* and *langars* of the holy places in Malwa area of Punjab and Rajasthan (Seechewal, Letter dated 2308/2009). Apart from this it is also pertinent to mention that the river, being linked to martyrdom of Saheed Bhagat Singh (Nayar, 2000), has a unique historical significance for the people of Punjab. Similarly, river Ravi is associated with the martyrdom of Guru Arjan Dev Ji (Singh, 2000). Again, Sant Seechewal was able to attract the attention of a large number of people to the pollution of the Godavari river in Maharashtra for projected it as a sacred river for being site of Guru Gobind Singh's declaration of Guru Granth Sahib as the Guru at Nanded Sahib. (*Nirmal Noor*, Dec. 2008-Jan. 2009).
- **Using PPCB as a forum**: Being a member of Punjab Pollution Control Board Sant Seechewal has tried his best to make the body aware of its duty. In this also he is using his religion as a weapon for environmentalism (Seechewal's letter dated 19/10/2010).
- **Demanding ban on fishing**: Fish play very important role in making rivers, ponds and other water resources free from pollution and maintain the balance of eco-system. It has been

found useful to ban fishing and hunting of aquatic creatures. Kar sewa team under the leadership of Sant Seechewal struggled hard to get fishing in Kali Bein banned (Nirmal Noor, July 2006), and finally succeeded in it. (*Ajit*, 20/10/2006).

- **Use of media**: Spreading awareness through media has been found very beneficial. Sant Seechewal publishes pamphlets, magazines (Nirmal Noor) and books, and maintains websites (www.nirmalkuteya.com, www.santseechewal.net, www.kalibein.net, etc.) for making the people aware of environmental hazards. Now a Community Radio has also benn installed at Nirmal Kuteya Seechewal for this purpose .
- **Employing indigenous techniques**: In constructing sewerage systems and water treatment plants, bathing ghats and bricked roads on the banks of the river, Sant Seechewal's kar sewak team adopted simple indigenous technology which is low-cost and easy to install and maintain. Such techniques can also be effective for conservation of other natural water resources.
- **Collective work – a joyful experience**: The kar sewa has proved an ecstatic experience for the participating people. It abridges the gap between man and nature and links individual self to greater self of humanity. It liberates man from bondage of his own narrow self and widens his vision to the whole universe. Religious zeal multiplies the efficiency of the Kar sewaks so that they can put in untiring efforts and work wonders within no time. Dr. Kalam (24/06/2007) describes this elating experience of kar sewa thus,

  > I also saw a great happiness of giving on the faces of the volunteers who had physically participated in this task. This is a great example of giving and happiness arising out of giving.

6. Kar sewa of the Holy Bein as a role model:

Importance of Kar sewa experience on the Holy Kali Bein as a role model for other rivers and streams has been recognized by different people around the world (*Indian Express*, 18/08/2006). Walsh (2008) has included Sant Seechewal among the thirty "Heroes of Environment" of the world. Dr. Kalam (17/08/2006), hailing Kar Sewa of the Holy Bein as "a noble mission," has called upon the religious people and environmentalists all over the country to emulate Sant Seechewal's work. (*The Tribune*, 17/08/2006). Such combination of environmentalism and religion is, according to Dr. Kalam, the need of the hour today:

> We need in every worshipping place initiatives like that of Baba Balbir Singh Seechewal to keep water bodies and neighbourhood of the worshipping place clean (Kalam, 17/05/2007).
>
> What you, all the kar sewa people and selfless voluntary people have done is what India will always remember with gratitude and we are thankful to Baba Sahib. I am recommending that this type of practice in all worshipping places in India should take place (Kalam, 17/08/2006).

Sant Seechewal was an invitee at Conference of Leaders of World's prominent religions held at Windsor by UNDP and ARC under the Eco-Sikh Five Year Plan from Nov. 2 to 4, 2009 and at the Summit of World Religious Leaders at Climate Change Conference organized by UNO at Copenhagen (Denmark) from 7 to 13 Dec. 2009. The letter of invitation to Copenhagen Climate change Conference clearly stated that "The environmental crisis is really a moral and spiritual crisis, a crisis of consciousness." It indicates UNO and other global environmental organization have now come to believe that we must repose our faith in religion to create an eco-friendly atmosphere and reach a consensus over the environmental matters and bring out a viable solution to environmental problems.

While kar sewa of the river Kali Bein is still going on, Sant Seechewal and his Kar Sewak team have started applying their kar sewa experience beyond Kali Bein to other rivers, streams and beins of Punjab and India and, thus, testing the efficacy of the Kali Bein model which has now come to be known as "Seechewal Model".

Apart from a large number of common people, prominent religious personalities of Punjab, such as Sant Sewa Singh of Khadoor Sahib, Sant Daya Singh of Tahli Sahib, Sant Baldev Krishan Singh of Gillan, Sant Sukhwant Singh of Nahal, etc. are joining together under the leadership of Sant Seechewal to put in concerted efforts for the conservation of endangered natural water resources of Punjab including Kala Sanghian Drain (*Ajit*, 18/09/2010). The religious strategies (listed at 5 above) can be seen working in the making of Kar sewa as a role model for other rivers.

7. Conclusion:

Kar sewa experiment in river-water management is a historical move to prevent the deterioration of environment and preserve the pristine purity and glory of natural water resources. Religious reverence for the Almighty and His nature is its guiding light. But it does not ignore the significance of science and technology. In fact, Kar sewa of the Holy Bein presents an ideal blend of religion and science, which aims at social reformation as well as environmental upgradation. Religion, here, is not for the salvation of individual souls alone, but that of the whole humanity. It is based on *daya,* compassion to all creatures - human or non-human: "*Sarbat da Bhala*" (Chitkara, 2002). It highlights comprehensive nature of man's life: man related to man, to other creatures, to his surroundings, his environment. It is an educative and illuminating experience showing how the governments and the people can join together to convert the bane of contaminated waters into a boon for agriculture. The problems such as global warming, pollution of natural water resources, shortage of drinkable water, etc. are nothing but a result of our negligence and mismanagement of natural resources. Religion wields great influence on the minds of large sections of the population of the world. Not only can religion be an effective means to spread environmental awareness among the people, but also provide very useful strategies in the practice of environmental conservation. In present-day world, it is the duty of religions to sort out the huge social and environmental problems endangering the very

essence of life of man and other creatures on the face of this globe. This is what Kar Sewa of the Kali Bein has to teach us.

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Letters

1. In a letter to the Chairman of Central Pollution Control Board, No. 143/sss-CPCB/3,dated 2308/2009, Sant Balbir Singh Seechewal notes, "Another matter of extreme shame is that this dirty toxic water has also to be used in preparing langars (community kitchens), and Prasad, and holy sarovars (water tanks) of the religious places (mandirs & gurdwaras) in these areas. All this hurts the religious feelings of the devotees."

2. Sant Seechewal's letter dated 19/10/2010 to the Chairman Punjab Pollution Control Board containing his objections to the proceedings of 148th meeting of PPCB held on 20/10/2010 registers a strong protest against the criminal carelessness of the Board in checking the pollution of Punjab rivers clearly indicating his warring posture. Also see "PPCB meetings full of irregularities: Seechewal," *Indian Express,* Oct. 19, 2010. And "PPCB 'failed to enforce laws' Seechewal says points raised by him at meetings not included in records," *The Tribune*, 12/11/2010.

3. The Invitation Letter (Received by email on 11/11/2009 at 4.31 am) for COP15 – The United Nations Climate Change Conference to be held in Copenhagen, from 7 to 13 Dec. 2009 by GPIW clearly stated, "The environmental crisis is really a moral and spiritual crisis, a crisis of consciousness."

Speeches

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2. Kalam, A.P.J. Abdul, "Visit to Alagappa University and Address to the Students,

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3. Kalam, A.P.J. Abdul, "Celebration of Technological Achievements: All India Radio Address on Technology Day," 11/05/2004. Reprinted in *Kar Sewa of the Holy Bein*, An Annual Publication of Nirmal Kuteya Seechewal, July 2004, p. 136.
4. Kalam, A.P.J. Abdul, "Address during the Inauguration of 60th Anniversary Diamond Jubilee Celebration of Sree Narayana Misssion, Singapore," 27/80/2008. Reprinted in *Nirmal Noor*, Vol. 30, Dec. 2008-January 2009, pp. 6-8.
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6. Kalam, A.P.J. Abdul, "Address at the Launching of the Centenary Endowment Scheme of Calcutta Club Limited, Kolkata, West Bengal." 17/05/2007, Reprinted in *Nirmal Noor*, Vol. 20, June 2007, pp. 38-42.
7. Kalam, A.P.J. Abdul, "Visit to Kali Bein at Sultanpur Lodhi." 17/08/2006. Reprinted in *Nirmal Noor*, Vol. 19, May 2007, p.24.

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